

E.M. Forster and the Legacy of Aestheticism: “Kipling’s Poems” (1909) and Forster’s Dialogue with Max Beerbohm

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Abstract

E.M. Forster’s 1909 lecture on Rudyard Kipling’s poetry was a key document in his development as a critic. He used this talk as an occasion to re-examine his relationship to the “Art-for-Art’s-Sake” principles of the late-Victorian Aesthetic Movement, which continued to guide influential contemporaries such as the artist and author, Max Beerbohm, with whom Forster had both personal and professional connections. Distinguishing his own responses to Kipling from those of Beerbohm, as expressed through the latter’s savagely satirical visual works, was a necessary step in Forster’s forging of an individual voice for the modern age. But despite Forster’s wish always to avoid labels and to escape being identified with inflexible positions, he turned in his later years to open advocacy of Art for Art’s Sake.

Keywords: E.M. Forster, Max Beerbohm, Rudyard Kipling, Aestheticism, Modernism

In a tribute to E.M. Forster that appeared in the 5 June 2020 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* (UK) in the midst of a global pandemic, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has spoken of him as the champion of those who wish to evade lockdowns of one kind or another: “Nearly every character we are asked to admire in his fiction is trying to escape from something: the unforgiving grip of the past, or the hollow rituals of convention, or the geographical boundaries and social limitations of England” (2020, 10). Douglas-Fairhurst is certainly correct about these fictional figures. But Forster was something of an escape artist himself, refusing to allow labels to be placed on himself and on his own talents, even going so far as to eschew anything that smacked of professional recognition for his interests and abilities. He was, for instance, an astute commentator on art, and this was never more the case than in his essay “Me, Them and You” in *Abinger Harvest* (Forster 1936a). There, he detailed his reactions to an exhibition of John Singer Sargent’s artworks, focusing his wrath on *Gassed*, with its glamourized depiction of blinded, working-class conscripts in the First World War, and expressing his moral outrage over the “lie” that this painting represented (Forster 1936a, 28). Yet in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, Forster later would deny that he had ever been a useful commentator on visual images, insisting that “I am bad at looking at pictures[,]” and that “Long years of wandering down miles of galleries have convinced me that there must be something [...] which I am incapable of detecting for myself” (1951b, 131).

His refusal to assume the title of art critic concealed, however, the lifelong centrality to his critical practice in general of observations upon and interactions with works of art. Although he insisted, in the essay “Not Looking at Pictures,” that he lacked any “natural esthetic [sic] aptitude” (Forster 1951b, 132), and that only with the patient tutelage of friends such as Roger Fry had he found his “appreciation of pictures” to be “improving” (Forster 1951b, 133), this was hardly the case. Forster adhered more closely than he might have wished to acknowledge to the model of his immediate predecessors in the Aesthetic Movement – in particular, of Oscar Wilde. As Michael F. Davis has shown, Wilde’s development as a writer paralleled and intersected with his “long arc of increasingly complex thinking about art”; he had a “primary interest in art and aesthetics” and a “broad understanding” of visual effects (2018, 111). Wilde was, moreover, a compulsive sketcher of faces and other forms, especially while in the midst of literary composition, as the recent discovery in the Free Library of Philadelphia of his poetical notebook, ca. 1879–1880 has revealed (Richter 2016). In this, Wilde scarcely was unique, for many of his contemporaries among the late-Victorian Aesthetes defined themselves through their ability to

range across the arts and to evaluate, or even to produce, visual objects in conversation with written texts.

So, too, reflecting upon visual images allowed Forster to clarify and articulate his own ideology, as he did, for instance, when confronted with the literal painting-over of working-class men's suffering and exploitation by the British Army in Sargent's *Gassed*. Differentiating his own responses to images, which tended toward the moral and political (as in "Me, Them and You"), from those of many of his Aesthetic Movement predecessors – such as Walter Pater, for whom Beauty and Art for its own sake were the primary concerns – helped Forster to define his philosophical and social positions, particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century. In doing so, he participated in what Christine Froula has described as "Bloomsbury's ethical aestheticism," which was a departure from the "Decadent aestheticism" of the earlier generation associated with the late-nineteenth century, yet a derivative of Aestheticism nonetheless (2017, 127).

While awareness of Aesthetic Movement antecedents in general played an important role in his formation, Forster remained especially indebted to Max Beerbohm (1872–1956). Beerbohm proved a particularly valuable mentor-figure, because he had staked his claims to public notice not merely as an essayist, a reviewer, a fiction-writer, and a visual artist, but as a master of the sort of urbane, ironic and comic, but also pointedly critical, voice to which Forster himself would aspire. Yet Beerbohm functioned, too, as a negative touchstone for Forster, for he represented an ultimately untenable stance. Despite the upheavals of the British social landscape – in terms of gender roles, along with class – in the years leading up to and following the First World War, Beerbohm adhered to the aesthetic credo that he had formed in the 1890s, when he was part of the elite *Yellow Book* circle. His was a fidelity to artistic ideals, as well as to a fixed social order, that Forster would find admirable in principle, but too rigid in practice for the demands of the new age. It tempted Forster, even as it repelled him.

In the case of Forster, perhaps more than most Bloomsbury modernists, engagement with (and disengagement from) the Aesthetes' philosophy of Art for Art's Sake would remain a complex, lifelong, and sometimes tortuous process. His struggle with it, moreover, was personal, for it informed his relationship with individuals in daily life, as well as with individual texts. The legacy of Aestheticism was one that he never would wholly abandon, and his discomfort with that legacy was a matter he never could fully resolve.

The dilemma posed by his ambivalence becomes strikingly – if not painfully – clear in the context of a lecture on Rudyard Kipling's poetry that Forster composed toward the end of the first decade of the new century, a moment when he was in transition, remaking

himself from an inheritor of late-Victorianism into a commentator ready to take on the coming age. Written for delivery sometime in 1909 at a meeting of a provincial literary society, Forster's lecture, which is now housed in the King's College, Cambridge University archives, was newly and expertly edited by Michael Lackey for the Spring 2007 issue of the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Reading "Kipling's Poems" today can afford literary historians an invaluable perspective on Kipling as a continuing flashpoint for controversy. Equally important to scholars interested in Forster, however, is the surprisingly vigorous defense it offers of Kipling's right to be regarded as a serious, accomplished poet. Significantly, this defense begins, despite his later disavowal of any claim to serve as a guide to art, with Forster's description of his encounters with two works of visual art. Both works were contemporary caricatures of Kipling drawn by Max Beerbohm, and both were images that savaged Kipling's literary reputation, as well as his physical appearance. One skewered him as an opportunist posing as the spokesperson of the working classes and pandering to the jingoism and coarseness of the masses. The other portrayed him as a writer unworthy of the Nobel Prize that he had received 1907, particularly in comparison with two late – Victorian Aesthetic poets – George Meredith and Algernon Swinburne – who, in Beerbohm's opinion, had deserved that honour instead, and whom he depicted as floating loftily above the undeserving awardee.

Forster's lecture on Kipling was a work of multi-dimensional and also multi-directional appraisal. There, Forster contended not only with Kipling in his role as a poet, weighing his weaknesses against his strengths, but with the hovering presence of Max Beerbohm, the arch Aesthete, in his dual roles as both a visual artist and as a critic. In confronting, considering, and then rejecting Beerbohm's unequivocal dismissal of Kipling, Forster seems to have arrived at a new position in relation to the twin poles of dynamic populism and of Aesthetic elitism – albeit a position that would never be an entirely comfortable or fixed one – and so to have furthered his own progress toward the creation of an independent voice with which to articulate the complexities of a changing age. He moved closer, moreover, to what Michèle Mendelssohn has defined as an "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" that simultaneously embraced a distinctly English perspective and stood outside of it, while it "enable[d] [...] a politically engaged take on modernity" (2016, 493).

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As Peter Jeffreys has established in *Eastern Questions: Hellenism and Orientalism in the Writings of E.M. Forster and C.P. Cavafy* (2005), Forster was greatly influenced by

what he calls the “Decadent Aestheticism of Paterian Hellenism” that had shaped the world (especially the homosocial and homoerotic circles) of turn-of-the-century British university life from which, as a 1901 Cambridge graduate, he had emerged; yet, as Jeffreys also notes, Forster was “dissatisfied” with any purely aesthetic mode of thought and conscious of its limitations (2005, 140). He could not follow Walter Pater in advocating unqualifiedly for the principle of Art (with a capital “A”) for its own sake, nor could he partake in the spirit of Pater’s *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889) and confine himself to an *appreciative* reading of visual works. Though he might sometimes mock gently, as he did in *A Room with a View* (1908), both the legacy of John Ruskin and the conduct of Ruskin’s disciples, Forster was nonetheless influenced himself by Ruskin’s competing Victorian vision of art criticism as necessarily a form of moral criticism. In essays such as “Me, Them and You” and in his public lectures, Forster’s own engagement with a visual work often involved weighing the justness of the artist’s representation of a subject alongside the justice of the artist’s view of life as a whole. From art, he both sought and demanded wisdom, rather than mere aesthetic pleasure.

It was, therefore, unsurprising that when beginning his own critical evaluations in the lecture titled “Kipling’s Poems” for the Weybridge Literary Society, Forster would have turned first to something visual: the pencil, ink, and wash sketches of Max Beerbohm, and it was characteristic, too, of Forster to describe Beerbohm’s caricatures of Rudyard Kipling as offering viewers no simple enjoyment, but rather “food for thought” (Forster 2007, 12). He attributed to artists in general a power akin to that of writers to affect their audiences’ judgement – a power that he sometimes decried, as in the essay “Me, Them and You,” when it was abused by Society painters such as J.S. Sargent, or by the cartoonists of *Punch* who, as he wrote in “Notes on the English Character” (1920), pandered to the middle-class insularity “of the suburban householder who can understand nothing that does not resemble himself” (Forster 1936b, 9). Forster framed his lecture on Kipling’s poetry not only by describing in detail two of Beerbohm’s images – *Mr. Rudyard Kipling takes a bloomin’ day aht ...with Britannia, ’is gurl* [sic] (1904) and *The Nobel Award* (1907) – but by treating these works as the productions of a fellow critic whose negative opinions of the poet would have to be examined, understood, and ultimately countered.

In the case of Beerbohm, moreover, the visual artist with whom Forster contended was also a writer – one who had excelled at some of the very genres that Forster himself was attempting, and one who would continue to be mentioned by critics as an influence upon and even a rival to Forster, particularly as a wit and as a fantasist. When, for

instance, in the *Dial* magazine of May 1924, Hamish Miles reviewed Forster's fiction, it was to Beerbohm's that he compared it, while noting its lack of Beerbohm's "elaborated urbanity" (1973, 192). The shadow of the elegant silhouette of "Max" (as he was always called familiarly by his contemporaries) loomed large throughout Forster's past, present, and future as a formidable presence.

For more personal reasons, too, Max Beerbohm was not a figure whom Forster could ignore. Although he maintained an ambiguously heterosexual public persona, Beerbohm had eagerly affiliated himself with the gay male set of Aesthetes surrounding Oscar Wilde in the 1890s; as N. John Hall says, "Max was close to homosexual men, and in his youth he moved easily in a circle that was about as openly homosexual as you could find" (2002, 34). The Aesthetic Movement in general was suffused with an atmosphere of queerness that attracted the young E.M. Forster. After the turn of the century, too, Beerbohm remained associated with a number of men with whom Forster became friends, as well. Beerbohm was more than merely a popular caricaturist, a drama critic, a writer of short fantasy fiction, or a successful author of parodies and comic essays. He was also an icon in the "Oxbridge" environment that Forster chose to inhabit, and Beerbohm's reputation remained potent in the donnish world that he memorialized in his most celebrated fiction, the 1911 fantasy novel *Zuleika Dobson*. His attitudes, opinions, and even his paradoxical pose as both a dandy and a humble man all proved significant in Forster's life and literary self-fashioning.

The degree and quality of the personal relationship that existed between Forster and Beerbohm is difficult, however, to pin down. S.N. Behrman, who recorded for posterity his extensive conversations with Beerbohm in the 1950s shortly before the latter's death, claimed that Forster ranked among "Max's great enthusiasms in literature" (1960a, 232). This list also included Jane Austen, Henry James, Ivan Turgenev, George Meredith, and Charles Lamb and thus dovetailed, perhaps not coincidentally, with many of Forster's own candidates for the literary Pantheon. But the Beerbohm scholar J.G. Riewald, on the contrary, insisted that "Max was not a great admirer of E.M. Forster" (2000, 88). Indeed, Riewald went on to note that in 1930 Beerbohm had admitted to Siegfried Sassoon that "he had not been able to get beyond Chapter One of *A Passage to India*" and had "disagreed" with Forster's 1927 *Aspects of the Novel* (2000, 184). Certainly, Beerbohm never showed the eager interest in Forster that he demonstrated in many of his other favorite authors (such as Meredith and Swinburne) through repeated, affectionate caricaturing of them. To produce his sole drawing of Forster, he waited until 1940 (Hart-Davis 1972, 65). He and Forster knew each other socially, although more intimately in the

1940s while Beerbohm and his wife, escaping war in Italy, were reluctant inhabitants of the village of Abinger in which Forster had made his home. (Beerbohm and Forster were fellow contributors to the *Abinger Chronicle*, the locally based literary magazine edited by Sylvia Sprigge during the Second World War.) They also corresponded occasionally, but Beerbohm never strove for a deeper friendship.

Forster, on the contrary, treated Beerbohm deferentially, both in print and in person. In "Notes on the English Character," a 1920 essay that appeared later in *Abinger Harvest*, he used Beerbohm's caricatures as an example of something that "really was funny," in contrast to the witless jokes that disfigured *Punch* magazine (Forster 1936b, 10). His 1929 evaluation of the Decadent comic author Ronald Firbank, also collected in *Abinger Harvest*, saw Forster comparing Firbank to the *Yellow Book* contributors of the 1890s and lauding Beerbohm as the more "intelligent" writer (Forster 1936c, 118). Forster went on record, too, with his praise of the novel *Zuleika Dobson* in *Aspects of the Novel* and thus helped to make Beerbohm's fantasy fiction, as F.W. Dupee has said, "obligatory reading for [...] literary initiates of the Twenties" (Dupee 1974, 175). According to P.N. Furbank, Forster's biographer, "Forster and Beerbohm liked each other and respected each other's work"; he adds, "For Beerbohm's seventieth birthday in 1942 [while Beerbohm was living in Abinger] a 'Maximilian Society' was founded, and the members presented him with a large gift of wine. Forster, as a member of the society, went one afternoon to help him drink it" (1979, 251). Ten years later, on the occasion of Beerbohm's eightieth birthday, Forster contributed to *Max Beerbohm 1952*, a celebratory manuscript volume of tributes, now housed in the library of Merton College, collected from artists and from "the most distinguished men of letters of that time" (Riewald 1991, 72–73).

To take on Beerbohm directly, therefore, in the opening of his 1909 lecture on Kipling, and to distinguish his opinions from those of a figure with whom he hoped to forge personal and professional links (and would go on doing so) was both a daring and a necessary strategy on Forster's part. It was also quite a logical move, for no one was better known than Beerbohm for public opposition to Kipling. Any defense, however partial or qualified, of the latter as a writer (and especially as a poet) would have to respond to Beerbohm's widely circulated attacks. In his 1972 catalogue of Beerbohm's published and unpublished caricatures, Sir Rupert Hart-Davis identified fully twenty-six different images of Kipling, ranging from savagely comic representations of Kipling alone to many that placed him in small or large groups of figures. This list did not even include, as J.G. Riewald has pointed out, the "cruel, bitterly satiric" drawings, "full of loathing," that Beerbohm added privately to the so-called "improved" copies of books

by or about Kipling that he owned – volumes such as *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892), “in which he had altered the illustration on the title-page into a portrait of the author, blood dripping from his reddened fingernails” (2000, 160). Among the most remarkable visual expressions of Beerbohm’s “loathing” was a caricatured head of Kipling that he incorporated into a 1922 fresco on the wall of the Villino Chiaro, the house in Rapallo, Italy where Beerbohm lived from 1910 until his death in 1956 (except for the time spent during the Second World War, by necessity, in Abinger). Though far away from Britain, Beerbohm chose to remind himself every day of the face of his longtime English nemesis.

Beerbohm did indeed cast himself in the role of Kipling’s implacable enemy and behaved accordingly. Only in old age would he speak almost regretfully of the vehemence and virulence with which he had pursued Kipling in decades past. To S.N. Behrman, who visited him in Italy during the final four years of his life, he confessed that the act of jabbing at Kipling – whether through the caricatures he published or exhibited, through his theatre reviews of plays adapted from Kipling’s fiction, or through his literary parodies of Kipling’s verse and prose – had taken on the aspect of a psychological compulsion. As he told Behrman rather sorrowfully in the 1950s,

When I first met him [Kipling], in Baltimore [in 1895], he received me so nicely [...] He was charming [...] And then – you know – his books kept coming out, and occasionally I was asked to review them. I couldn’t, you know, abide them. He was a genius, a very great genius, and I felt that he was debasing his genius by what he wrote. And I couldn’t refrain from saying so. It went on and on. Friends of his and mine kept telling me that he was pained and shocked by what I wrote, but I couldn’t stop. You know, I couldn’t stop. As his publications increased, so did my derogation. He didn’t stop; I *couldn’t* stop. I meant to, I wanted to. But I couldn’t. (1960a, 70; italics in original)

Rudyard Kipling’s early biographer, C.E. Carrington, was, as Behrman affirms, incorrect in asserting that Kipling remained “unmoved by Max’s attacks”; on the contrary, he wore the scars of his wounds forever: “When David Low wrote to Kipling asking to caricature him, Kipling refused, because, according to Low, he was still exacerbated [sic] by a caricature Max had done of him twenty years before, and on this ground he repelled all caricaturists” (1960b, 67).

Kipling’s reaction is easy to understand. Almost all commentators label Beerbohm’s series of visual and textual assaults on Kipling as the “cruellest thing” he ever did (Hall 2002, 145–46). Katherine Lyon Mix, chronicler of the *Yellow Book* magazine and its

1890s circle, stated unequivocally that "no person would ever be more bitterly caricatured by Max than Kipling" (1974, 16). J.G. Riewald added that Beerbohm "reserved his greatest hostility" for Kipling, and

frankly belonged to that 'acute and upright minority' of 'haters of Mr Kipling's work' [...] [hounding] him relentlessly in caricatures, critical articles, acerbic recollections, satirical verses, and in 'P.C. X, 36...' a devastating parody of his short-story style, first published in the *Saturday Review* of 15 December 1906 and subsequently included in *A Christmas Garland* (1912). (2000, 155–56)

Kipling was, as N. John Hall summed up in his Introduction to a 1993 reissue of *A Christmas Garland*, "Beerbohm's *bête noire*" (Hall 1993, xii). Only David Cecil, one of Beerbohm's early biographers, stood apart in suggesting that "Of course, he did dislike some people more than others [...] Kipling, for instance – and the fun he makes of them has a sharper edge to it in consequence. But his dislike is not so fierce as to make him lose his temper; so that his portraits are not horrible" (1964, 139). Yet Cecil went on to quote the words inscribed by Beerbohm on the title-page of his copy of Kipling's *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917): "By R.K. the Apocalyptic Bounder who can do such fine things but mostly prefers to stand (on tip-toe and stridently) for all that is cheap and nasty" (1964, 367). By any standard, this constituted quite a "horrible" denunciation of the author's conduct, as well as a gratuitously "fierce" dig at his short physical stature.

What fueled this animus? Lawrence Danson, in *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing* (1989), lay much of the blame at the victim's own doorstep: "It would be no paradox to say that what Beerbohm hated in Kipling was Kipling's hatred, his fierceness of feeling that only made itself more dangerous when it appeared in the service of chauvinism or sentimentality" (1989, 169). Some critics have agreed in principle, citing Kipling's repugnant positions on domestic and foreign political questions. David Cecil, for example, suggested, "As for the new middle-class imperialist Toryism associated with [...] Kipling – aggressive, hustling, ungentlemanlike – it was all Max detested most. The Boer War was its typical manifestation. Max was opposed to the Boer War" (1964, 180).

Despite his championing of some aspects of Kipling's poetry in his 1909 lecture, E.M. Forster responded to Kipling's politics with an antipathy equal to Beerbohm's, as he demonstrated in a letter of 29 July 1911. There he told Malcolm Darling about reading Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) with "mingled joy and disgust," while objecting specifically to its xenophobic determination to teach British audiences that "foreigners

are envious and treacherous, Englishmen, through some freak of God, never –” (Forster 1983, 123). In the same letter, Forster continued, “Kipling and all that school know it’s an untruth at the bottom of their hearts – as untrue as it is unloveable [sic]. But, for the sake of patriotism, they lie” (1983, 123). For Forster, there was no graver sin on the part of an artist than failure to speak the truth – hence, his condemnation of Sargent’s *Gassed* for its “lie” about working-class male bodies in the First World War (1936a, 28). As his lecture on Kipling’s poetry showed, Forster could forgive Kipling’s own politically motivated lie only because he felt that Kipling did speak truly about other matters, including parental love, childhood, and children.

While conceding that Kipling possessed the virtue of never being dull, Forster declared himself, in his 1909 talk, most in sympathy with the poems that invested their literary energy not in political matters, but in the affections, especially in familial relations. In “Kipling’s Poems,” he lauded without irony, as a significant and timeless theme, the strain of fatherly affection – evocations of what he called that “nobler bond: the thread of paternal love that has descended unbroken through the centuries” (Forster 2007, 26) – running throughout Kipling’s work; he also quoted at length examples of verse informed by this loving emotion. Indeed, praise for this aspect of Kipling’s literary sensibility was the note toward which the lecture built and on which it ended. Here, it is worth remembering Furbank’s descriptions of Forster’s own familial attachments, which were both obsessive and excessive. With his mother, in particular, Forster engaged in a “love-affair” that “made Forster’s childhood a radiantly happy one, [... that] went on, in a sense, for the rest of both their lives [... and that] dominated Forster’s existence” (Furbank 1979, 21). When it came to depictions of the ties between parents and children, Forster responded positively – perhaps for biographical reasons – to a bathetic strain that Beerbohm resisted. Indeed, as Lawrence Danson has pointed out, Beerbohm distrusted Kipling’s strategic indulgence in moments of “sentimentality” (1989, 169). In a 1903 letter to a friend who was about to see the dramatized version of one of Kipling’s short stories, Beerbohm cheekily advised, “Do not drown the stalls with your tears; buckets can be obtained from the attendants” (1989, 36–37).

Beerbohm’s main quarrel with Kipling’s work, however, sprang from different sources. On the one hand, as N. John Hall has pointed out, “Max especially disliked Kipling’s brutish notion of ‘manliness’” (1993, xiii) with all its concomitant macho posturing and homophobic rejection of what was supposedly effeminate. In an infamous critique of a theatrical adaptation of Kipling’s *The Light That Failed* (1890) for the 14 February 1903 issue of the *Saturday Review* magazine, Beerbohm naughtily flipped Kipling’s hyper-masculine persona, insisting that anyone who wrote so “feverishly” about men’s “virility” was

probably not a man at all, but in fact a woman author employing a male pseudonym (1924, 245–46). No other accusation could have injured its target so effectively. That same drama review, however, also contained a less widely repeated pronouncement that went directly to the root of Beerbohm's deepest antagonism toward Kipling: "The ugly word, the ugly action, the ugly atmosphere – for all these he has an inevitable scent; and the uglier they be, the keener seems his relish of them" (1924, 247). Beerbohm found distasteful the bullying tone, the slang, the affectation of hearty masculinity, the worship of capitalist acquisitiveness, and the militarism, along with the relentless advocacy of the British Imperialist project, in Kipling's prose and poetry alike. But above all, he objected to what he saw as Kipling's purposeful embrace of ugliness and deliberate eschewal of beauty.

At the core of Beerbohm's philosophy was devotion to the Beautiful (with a Paterian capital "B"). As Dennis Denisoff has noted, "From early on in his career, Beerbohm wished to distinguish himself from aestheticism's major names"; yet his "sympathy and respect for people such as Wilde, Pater, and Swinburne" proved unflagging and life-long (2001, 133). The major figures of the Aesthetic Movement remained his guides, and their principles informed his own. Indeed, as Kristin Mahoney puts it, one of Beerbohm's favorite cultural roles was that of an "old guard representative of England's previous avant-gardes" (2015, 27), and that included the Aesthetic Movement. It was not merely that Kipling "jarred horribly on a sensitive taste," as David Cecil would have it (1964, 251); rather, Kipling offended against a creed that elevated beauty to the highest of ideals, which was a belief to which Beerbohm adhered as fervently as any religious zealot. Even in his role as a visual satirist, Beerbohm asserted the supreme importance of pursuing beautiful effects. In a 1901 essay titled "The Spirit of Caricature," he wrote,

The perfect caricature is in itself a beautiful thing. For caricature, not less than for every other art, beauty is a primal condition [...] The most perfect caricature is that which [...] most accurately exaggerates, to the highest point, the peculiarities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment, in the most beautiful manner. (1962, 102)

What he demanded of the visual arts, he also required of literature. In drawing after drawing, he protested against Kipling's deliberately "ugly" writing by turning its author into a repellent, bullet-headed dwarf, while always doing so beautifully, of course.

Beerbohm's caustic images reached a wide audience. The first of the two caricatures to which Forster refers at the opening of his lecture on Kipling's poetry – *The Nobel*

Award (1907), with its caption of “Lord God, they ha’ paid in full!” echoing Kipling’s own line (“Lord God, we ha’ paid it in!”) from “The Song of the Dead” – was exhibited at the Carfax Gallery in London in April 1908. The second, *Mr Rudyard Kipling takes a bloomin’ day aht, on the blasted ‘eath, along with Britannia, ‘is gurl* (1904), not only hung at the Carfax in May 1904, but also was reproduced that year in Beerbohm’s volume of twenty caricatures, *The Poets’ Corner* (Hart-Davis 1972, 87). Thus, Forster felt comfortable in assuming that his listeners at the Weybridge Literary Society’s meeting in 1909 would have seen and remembered these two images: the first blasting Kipling’s unworthiness to receive a laurel that should have been awarded to far better late-Victorian poets, such as George Meredith and Algernon Swinburne; the second lampooning Kipling as an absurd figure, with his British chauvinism and his aggressive courting of the working classes. Further visual mockery by Beerbohm of Kipling as a belligerent, vain, and pushing figure had appeared at the turn of the century in such diverse publications as the *World* magazine’s Christmas number in 1900, the *Pall Mall* magazine of February 1902, and in the 1896 volume of Beerbohm’s work titled *Twenty-Five Gentlemen* (Hart-Davis 1972, 87). Long before Beerbohm wrote to Holbrook Jackson to disagree with the positive evaluation of Kipling in Jackson’s study, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), readers were well acquainted with the visual manifestations of his belief that “as a poet [...] R.K. seems to me not to exist, except for the purpose of contempt” (Beerbohm 1989, 94).

When, in his lecture on Kipling’s poetry, Forster wrote of the error of defining Kipling merely as a bounder who wears a cheap derby and consequently of missing what was remarkable in Kipling’s verse, it was clearly of Max Beerbohm that he was thinking, and it was Beerbohm’s caricatures that he was referencing. The publicly circulated descriptions of Kipling as a callow, crass figure and the visual images of Kipling as a little man in just such a hat were Beerbohm’s own creation. But in “Kipling’s Poems,” Forster did not attribute the dismissal of Kipling to any vicious or unjust impulses on Beerbohm’s part; instead, he suggested respectfully that the fault lay with the doctrine of Aestheticism – with the limitations of judgement and blind spots that it encouraged. Early in his lecture, Forster explicitly named the philosophy of “Art for Art’s sake” as one of the “two danger fronts which the critic has to avoid[,]” for it would cause him to “undervalue Kipling” and “miss half the wonder of his work” (2007, 14). The second such “danger front” was its opposite – i. e., what Forster called the worship of “Life for life’s sake” and of mere “virile stuff,” which would lead the critic to “overvalue” Kipling (2007, 14). In staking out this position, Forster distinguished himself from Beerbohm by seeking an aesthetic

middle ground: a critical space that would allow him to recognize the centrality not only of beauty, but of a vital, albeit uncouth, energy that rightly appealed to the newly democratized mass audiences whose opinions increasingly mattered. At the same time, he pledged fealty to neither perspective.

There were other moments, too, in this same lecture, when Forster seemed not merely to be keeping Beerbohm in mind but talking back to him directly, especially while praising Kipling's poems inspired by childhood. To call the hyper-manly Kipling a child-like figure and even "half a child himself" as Forster did in his 1909 talk (2007, 25) was in itself controversial; with Beerbohm as part of the audience that Forster had in mind for this statement, it was aggressively provocative. Kipling's work for young readers had long been accepted as part of the training for British Imperial manhood, by "limiting and hardening acceptable forms of masculinity" and, as Kimberley Reynolds has put it, by showing boys "that the kind of men who can successfully expand and rule the empire need to live on their wits and physical daring" (1994, 31). Forster, however, stripped Kipling of the aura of a drill sergeant and suggested instead that he was an imaginative, sensitive, and even somewhat fey being, prone to dreaminess and to inhabiting the sphere of fairies and other imaginary beings, "progressing, however shyly, from the rule of the Law to that of the Spirit" (2007, 26). Forster emphasized, moreover, Kipling's identity as one who, Peter-Pan-like, never grew up – a description with tremendous resonance for all who knew Max Beerbohm and for Beerbohm himself.

If there is one consistent note struck in the biographies of Beerbohm and in the autobiographies of his personal acquaintances, it is the characterization of him as like a child. David Cecil wrote of him as "an unusual mixture of the childish and the precocious" and described how "Along with his prolonged childhood Max kept the child's confidence in the possibility of happiness" (1964, 27). In his memoir of the turn-of-the-century London art scene, the artist William Rothenstein, one of Beerbohm's intimates, spoke of his friend's juvenile appearance and "baby face" (1937, 144). Lawrence Danson, too, has illuminated how Beerbohm used this childishness self-consciously and made it a key component of his self-caricatures throughout his lifetime, offering the public a visual image of himself as "always a small figure," with an emphasis upon "the delicate body with its tiny feet" and the "round playfulness of the high forehead, small chin, and infantile button-mouth" (1982, 1). This "playfulness" was not a matter of physical qualities alone, for David Cecil has also linked it to the authorial persona developed by Beerbohm in his essays: "If he does make a serious point [...] it is in a playful tone; any imaginative moment takes the form of a playful flight of fancy" (Cecil 1970, 14). Indeed the sole

flaw in Beerbohm's narrative voice, according to Cecil, was a tendency to sound, as in his *Yellow Book* fantasy "The Happy Hypocrite" (1896), "a little too childish" (1970, 14).

By identifying Kipling not as an Imperialist bully, but instead as a childlike character, Forster metaphorically seized the pen from the caricaturist's hand. He redrew Kipling's small figure as Beerbohm's double, and implicitly challenged Beerbohm to acknowledge this resemblance. It was a daring move that came toward the end of his 1909 lecture, but no more daring than his insistence upon casting the hyper-macho Kipling as a rather fey artist, who sometimes lived in the realm of the fantastic and who could write delicately about what Forster labeled as "exquisite things" (2007, 26).

Belief in the importance of the fantastic was dear to all the late-Victorian Aesthetes and their disciples. It suffused Walter Pater's 1878 semi-autobiographical short story, "The Child in the House," with, as Denis Donoghue says, the presence of "spiritual entities" and gave readers the image of childhood as "a dream" state populated by "ghosts and revenants" (1995, 181–82). Both early and late in his career, Beerbohm followed Pater's lead in writing fiction rife with spectral presences and supernatural interventions. He also emulated Pater and Oscar Wilde in perfecting a style that was, to use the word so prized by turn-of-the-century advocates of Aestheticism, *exquisite*: "Beauty of expression had been Max's aim from the time when, as a freshman at Merton, he had amused his tutor by his wish to attend Walter Pater's lectures," as S.C. Roberts reports (1962, xiii). By associating Kipling with fantasy and also with "exquisite" writing, Forster proposed an unexpected – and no doubt unwelcome – likeness between Beerbohm, as the adherent of Art for Art's Sake, and Kipling, as the pragmatic advocate of a brutal Imperialism. (Later, in his 1927 study of fiction, *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster would apply the very same adjective, "exquisite," to the effects in Beerbohm's own *Zuleika Dobson* [1927, 117]). Forster undermined the grounds for the revulsion towards Kipling that Beerbohm felt and spread through his visual caricatures, at the same time that he asserted the artistic value of certain qualities, such as raw vitality and energy, that Beerbohm neither had nor wished to possess. By doing so, Forster opened the way toward exhibiting such antithetical qualities himself, in forging a new modernist style that would differ from Beerbohm's Aestheticism.

When arguing against Beerbohm, Forster was of course also arguing with himself. As he showed through the composition of his 1908 novel *A Room with a View*, he was indeed attracted (philosophically, as well as erotically) to the elemental, dynamic physicality embodied by George Emerson and by the anti-elitist, democratic vision of George's father. Yet at this period in his life, the fictional character with whom he had more in

common was the awkward and hyper-refined Cecil Vyse, who distances himself from experience through Paterian appreciation and who clings proudly both to his educated tastes and to his "decadence" (Forster 1908, 142).

Through the process in 1909 of deciding upon Kipling's place as a poet, Forster engaged in a critically pivotal struggle to come to terms with the legacy of late-Victorian Aestheticism. He made use of Beerbohm's hostile caricatures of Kipling to define where Aestheticism grew too narrow to appeal to him; he also made use of Kipling's work to help expand the parameters of value for his own writing and to incorporate "vitality" (Forster 2007, 13). Eventually, he would declare that art is "unique not because" it is "beautiful," but because it is coherent: "it is the only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony" (Forster 1951a, 90). Forster's version of modernism would attempt to yoke the "exquisite" appreciation of the fantastic (as perfected by the Aesthetes) to the unironic celebration of common sentiment and even of vulgarity (as perfected by Kipling) into something resembling coherence. One fruit of that yoking would be his 1910 novel, *Howards End*. Published a year after Forster's lecture for the Weybridge Literary Society, that work of fiction became his meditation on the act of mediation. In it, he would *connect*, however awkwardly, the Kipling-loving world with Beerbohm's and bring the energy of the motor car into relation – at times, even into a loving relationship – with the refinement of the art gallery through the merging of Basts, Wilcoxes, and Schlegels.

In the past, some historians of literary modernism chose to overlook Forster's responses to late-Victorian concepts of Art for Art's Sake as crucial elements in the development of his fiction and non-fiction prose alike. David Medalie's 2002 study, *E.M. Forster's Modernism*, for instance, made not a single mention of either Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde, let alone of Max Beerbohm. Such omissions are puzzling, for Forster never strayed completely from allegiance to the aesthetic vision that sustained Beerbohm, and no discussion of Forster's mature style or critical stance can be complete without attention to this relationship.

In his *Commonplace Book* of 1937, Forster wrote, "T.E. [Lawrence] used to say I was civilised [sic]. Max certainly is" (1985, 105). An important aspect of being civilized, it seemed, was affirming the value and importance of the "unfashionable" (Forster 1951a, 87). Max Beerbohm, as J.G. Riewald has noted, espoused openly "views [that] were often remote from, or at variance with those of the majority of his intellectual contemporaries" (2000, 88), and such independent "variance" was a quality that Forster never ceased to admire. Among the "unfashionable" doctrines to which Forster himself

laid claim, in a 1949 address to the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, was a distrust of “mateyness” in artists (Forster 1951a, 92) – i.e., the pose of ordinariness, social conformity, and hail-fellow-well-met-ness of the sort that Kipling had cultivated, especially as a poet. An artist, Forster averred in this post-Second World War lecture, was always more properly a “Bohemian” and an “outsider,” detached from and even above his fellows (Forster 1951a, 93). Turning to the words of the art critic Sir Kenneth Clark – yet another figure from the visual arts – for support, Forster concurred with Clark in stating that the work of poets and of painters still mattered “precisely because they are not average men; because [...] they far exceed the average” (Forster 1951a, 93). If this meant that the “Bohemian” artist sometimes risked falling into the attitudes of “idiosyncrasy and waywardness” that had afflicted the Paterian Aesthete – what Forster called the condition of walking around “with a peacock’s feather in his hand” – so be it (1951a, 93). To Forster in 1949, looking back upon Aestheticism after nearly half a century of modernism’s own errors and excesses, such preciosity seemed a risk worth taking and a sin worth committing.

Perhaps most surprisingly, Forster also announced at both the beginning and the end of this same 1949 speech that his own “unfashionable” beliefs included the very one that had fueled Max Beerbohm’s attacks on Kipling: that is, faith in “Art for Art’s Sake” (1951a, 95). When doing so, he even employed the Paterian capitalization of the concept. Returning to and re-examining some of the issues he had raised four decades earlier in his lecture on Kipling’s poetry, Forster closed a circle in his thinking. He had long ago effected his transition into modernism, and modernism itself had moved on from its initial self-definition through opposition to Aestheticism. Eventually, he no longer needed to separate himself with the same vehemence from this literary and artistic point of origin. Despite what Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has rightly identified as Forster’s impulse in his earlier work to champion escape from constraints and evasion of labels, by the time he had reached the age of seventy, Forster chose to proclaim proudly in the concluding words of his 1949 address that “though I don’t believe that only art matters, I do believe in Art for Art’s Sake” (1951a, 95).

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Appendix



Max Beerbohm, *The Nobel Award*, 1907 (Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press) (c) Estate of Max Beerbohm 2020.